



"I am not a nut case; I do value my life," said Gould, who has an abandoned mine in his backyard. "Why do people climb mountains and risk their lives or go deep-sea diving? It's a fascination, a rush."

Gould said the Andersons fell prey to the most common trap of mine exploration: inexperience.

"I blame it on the thrill-seeking shows I've seen on TV," he said. "It's just a shame they lost their lives on something so foolish. I've never taken those kinds of chances, and most of us don't."

It's been 45 years since Gould and a few friends canvassed the Blue Light Mine, looking for a way in. Gould still remembers one water-filled portal that wasn't worth the risk.

"We were all excellent swimmers and we had diving masks, but it was too dangerous," he said. "As soon as you go into murky water like that, you stir up the mud and you can't see in front of your face."

Gould and his buddies eventually slipped into a two-foot hole that dropped into a tunnel, part of the five miles of shafts that make up the mine. They spent several hours envisioning what life must have been like for those who spent their days swinging pick axes hundreds of feet below the earth.

"I like to reconstruct the past. I like to pretend I'm with the old miners," Gould said. "I wonder how they ran their day-to-day operation. I like to think I'm in there swinging with them, mucking out the ore and shoveling it into the ore cars. I'm a historian and my history is underground."

Karl Kasarda, 28, who lives in Modjeska Canyon, was bitten by the abandoned mine bug about five years ago while on an off-road trip to a ghost town. He has since explored, photographed and researched 30 closed mines in Nevada, Arizona and California, including several in Orange County's mountains.

"It's one of the most significant parts of my life now," he said. "I love history. When you get inside some of these mines, it's amazing what you'll find: old tools, drill bits left stuck in the walls."

"You get to see the conditions these guys worked in

Kasarda will venture only into horizontal shafts; vertical shafts he won't touch. He goes in prepared: never alone and with multiple lights, ropes and with word left behind about where he is going and when he plans to return.

He has inched his way into the darkness and has felt lightheaded; he has been struck by tunnel vision. To Kasarda, they're signals that it's time to get out—quick.

"I'm a particularly cautious adventurer," the computer-security engineer said. "A lot of it is common sense. If you don't know whether you can get back or are not sure of the conditions, it's not worth it to me."

Plugging up the Blue Light and other abandoned mines—something state and federal officials say they'd like to do if they had the money—would be wrong, Kasarda said.

"The mine is part of the history of this community," he said of the Blue Light. "It's been on my list for quite a while. I need to try to get up there before they blow it up. It would be an awful shame if I couldn't see it."

On Carr's Web site, there's a photo of him wading through the same rusty soup where the Andersons lost their lives. The picture was snapped nearly 20 years ago, on a trip that eventually led to the other side of the below-ground pool, to a series of shafts where Carr poked around for three hours and found an old drill and a pocket of carbon dioxide from which he almost blacked out.

"It's just the way I remembered it," Carr said Friday, as he donned a hard hat with a light attached and stepped into the mine's boulder-strewn opening. "Wet and cold."

Carr said mine exploration is about margin of error.

Do you leave yourself a big cushion, a small cushion or do you venture out onto the razor's edge?

He concedes it's an imprecise science.

"Truth is, we're taking risks, calculated risks," he said.

He edged deeper into the mine, the air cool but stale, the walls stained crimson by minerals, and slowly closing in.

About 25 feet from the opening—far from where the Andersons found deep water and no oxygen in the air—Carr stopped, turned around and slushed out.

"I was the same age as those kids when I did that," he said of his last foray into the Blue Light Mine.

Back then, the cushion for error Carr left himself seemed big.

Today, it seems as small as the tunnel before him.

"I've gotten wiser with age," he said.

"Luckily, I've learned a lot without having to die for it."